

Globe Travel

HOTELS » AMENITIES



CLAYTON HANMER FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

FREE FOR ALL

Okay, so you expect a hotel to give you coffee. But what about a car and driver? Ask, **Dave McGinn** writes, and you may be surprised at what you can get for free

An economic downturn is always a good time to look for hotel deals. This winter, hotels everywhere are dropping rates to meet guests' shrinking budgets, even in hot destinations such as New York.

But why settle for a discount when you can also get good stuff free? Travellers are accustomed to certain free amenities, such as newspapers and coffee, from hotels. But hoteliers will go much further to make your stay more comfortable or save you money — especially in these troubled times, when they have to work harder to compete for your loyalty. That means perks from chicken noodle soup if you're sick to (literally) a free ride.

Hotels know that small complimentary services make a big impact on where travellers decide to stay, says Geoffrey Argue, president of Les Clefs D'Or Canada, the country's hotel concierge society. "People are much more conscious of complimentary services than they used to be," he says. So most hotels advertise a selection of unusual perks, often on their websites. Still, Argue says, it's simple to learn about them once you've arrived. "All you have to do is ask," he says.

In some cases, you will discover little bonus services that are overlooked by most of your fellow guests. For instance, while many hotels offer guests free gym access, Four Seasons provides guests with exercise clothing, so they can decide to dash down to the gym even if they forgot to pack their sweats. And if you're hurrying off to a meeting, some hotels (including the Park Hyatt Toronto) will help you look sharp with a complimentary shoe shine.

Of course, getting to a meeting can be a hassle: For business travellers, the expense of taxicabs or car rentals adds up. But what about a free car and driver? This year, W Hotels introduced a fleet of new Acuras to whisk you around from its U.S. locations. In Miami, the newly opened five-star Regent Bal Harbour has a Mercedes sedan at your service.

But such service isn't available only at flashy properties. Fairmont hotels in the U.S. have launched a complimentary service offering local transportation for members of Fairmont's guest loyalty program in Lexus hybrids; in Vancouver, Sutton Place and L'Hermitage offer all guests

complimentary rides, and the Park Hyatt Toronto has a comfortable Audi A8 at your service. (However, don't expect to be driven to the ends of the Earth. That Audi, for instance, will take guests only within five kilometres of the hotel.)

For those who get their motors running and head out on the highway, a stay at Best Western might be in order. Nearly 1,500 of its North American hotels are "rider friendly," meaning they offer free wipe-down towels and buckets to motorcycling guests. "Bikers have very specific needs when they arrive at hotels," says Troy Rutman, the chain's director of external communications. After a long ride, they typically want bottled water, lip balm and sunscreen. And they seem to know about the chain's offerings: 22,000 guests are enrolled in its Ride Rewards loyalty program, promoted through Harley-Davidson.

If you like the idea of tooling around on two wheels but are more into pedal power, Fairmont hotels in Canada will offer guests complimentary access to bicycles beginning this spring.

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“People are much more conscious of complimentary services than they used to be.”

Concierge Geoffrey Argue

WEEKENDS

» BY KIRA VERMOND

Here come the bells Stratford, Ont.

The Stratford Summer Music festival makes a winter appearance with a brass-and-bells concert this Saturday night. Thirty musicians will ring in the season, including the Weston Silver Band Brass Quintet and handbell ensembles Bells Ablaze and Synergy Bells. Sing along with the likes of soprano Brooke Dufton and organist Christopher Dawes as they turn a silent night into one filled with song.

Cost: \$25 main floor, \$30 balcony.

When: Saturday, doors open at 7 p.m.

Where: Stratford, Ont., about two hours from Toronto.

How: For more information, call 519-271-2101 or visit www.stratfordsummermusic.ca.

A sweet deal Montreal

Here's a good reason to swing a weekend in Montreal: Book a Sweet Deal package at one of the city's better hotels, and a second night is yours at half price. Guests also receive two Privilèges Passport coupons from Casino de Montréal, valued at \$40.

Cost: Depends on choice of hotel; from \$199 a night for Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth, or \$205 for Le Place d'armes Hôtel and Suites.

When: Until Dec. 31.

Where: Montreal, about six hours by car from Toronto.

How: For more information, visit www.tourisme-montreal.org/Offers/Autumn.

A city Christmas Chicago

Bundle up the kids and head to Chicago's Northerly Island — a 37-hectare park that juts into Lake Michigan at the heart of the city's downtown — for the city's Polar Adventure Days. Come face to face with live animals (including Siberian huskies) and watch ice-sculpture carvings. For more outdoor activity, try skating in the gorgeous lakefront Millennium Park.

Cost: Most events free; Museum of Science and Industry \$13 for adults and \$9 for kids.

When: Throughout the holiday season, but Polar Adventure Day is Saturday.

Where: Chicago, about a 10-hour drive or a short flight from Toronto.

How: For more information, visit www.choosechicago.com or www.msichicago.org.

» Special to The Globe and Mail

DEAL

» FREE FLORIDA NIGHTS

This winter and spring, families booking a three-night package to Universal Orlando Resort can get two additional nights free. The packages for a family of four begin at \$880, including accommodations at a hotel near Universal, transportation to the theme park and admission. The offer must be booked by Jan. 31 for travel through June 27.

For a higher price, you can upgrade to one of three AAA four-diamond hotels in the park. These packages, starting at \$1,464, come with Universal Express access, which allows guests to skip the regular lines at most theme park attractions. Those who travel before March 31 get a Universal Orlando Savings Guide worth \$192 in shopping and dining discounts.

» For more information, visit www.universalorlando.com. To combine the package with airfare, see a travel agent.

» Patrick Dineen

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Mazyar Mortazavi heads building and development company TAS.

How many trips do you take a year?
About two dozen.

What is your packing routine?
It takes five minutes or less. I take my toiletry kit, a suit, jeans, two white shirts, a sweater and cufflinks.

What are your carry-on musts?
As little as possible. I hate baggage. As long as I have a good magazine and my iPod, I'm good to go.

Where do you go on business?
I travel to Dubai regularly. I also make frequent stops in Europe; I've had breakfast in Paris and dinner in London.

What's your ideal destination?
Italy. I go a couple times a year if I can make an excuse. I like central to northern Italy in the fall; I like the south in the summer, when the tomatoes and seafood are at their best.

Do you eat airplane food?
It depends on the airline. Porter has a great little snack pack and sandwiches. Air France has wine and good cheese.

What is your favourite out-of-town restaurant?
Ustadi in Dubai, a kebab house. The yogurt-marinated kebabs are to die for. It's a local hole in the wall, but it's buzzing with local, simple stuff.

What is your favourite airport?
In Paris's de Gaulle, you feel like you're in the belly of an architectural sculpture, instead of a terminal. Dubai is efficient. Singapore is quick with getting travellers in and out. In Heathrow, there's lots to do.

Who was your most memorable seatmate?
I spoke to a guy in the U.S. military who was based out of Kandahar who told me his war stories. That stands out for me.

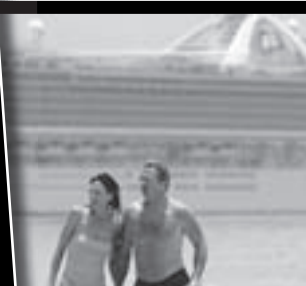
What's the worst thing about all this travel?
Being away from home, my kitchen, my bed. I'm happier at home than anywhere else.

And the best thing?
The lens-mirror phenomenon. In travelling, there's personal growth time, and you begin to see new things and how people work. There's a lot of inspiration in travel. It gives new light to what you're doing at home.
» Diana Pereira

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